

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Constitution Making

The Constitutional reform process is now probably entering its last phase. Dr. G.I. Pieris, the Minister for Constitutional Affairs, has categorically declared that the proposals will be brought before Parliament prior to the budget session in November.

Whether this implies a quickening of the deliberative activities of the Parliamentary Select Committee or the securing of a consensus within the Committee is unclear. From the absence of the chapters on the unit and extent of devolution in the proposals that were released by Dr. Pieris at the end of March, it is possible to conclude that these most contentious matters had not been considered by the Committee upto that time. Not many sessions have been held since then either. This may imply that the proposals to be brought to the Parliament will simply be the government's proposals endorsed by the PA majority in the Committee.

This may in turn imply sharp conflicts within Parliament and the absence of an endorsement by the required majority of two thirds of the members.

In such an eventuality, the options open to the government are limited. One option would be to dissolve Parliament and go for fresh elections with the hope of getting the two-thirds majority necessary for constitutional reform. However, the success of such a procedure seems rather unlikely, given the proportional representation system and the growing dissatisfaction with the government. The second would be to place the reform proposals before the people in a non-binding referendum both to obtain their support for the proposals and/or to get a mandate to turn the present Parliament into a Constituent Assembly. A simple majority of the members would then suffice to abolish the present constitution and promulgate a new one.

The second scenario certainly looks the more possible. However, this possibility has already led the Leader of the Opposition to declare that the UNP would oppose, both politically and legally, any attempt to turn the present Parliament into a Constituent Assembly.

The problem of changing the constitution seems to beset with many difficulties, as its framer, President Jayewardena, probably intended.

Educational Reform as Public Policy

As we have noted in the editorial of this issue, the proposed educational reform measures have been seized by oppositional forces as a plank to mobilize the youth and students in an anti-systemic direction. This development, in a way, shows the

PA government's lack of understanding in the politics of public policy reforms.

Although the government announced early this year that it intended to change Sri Lanka's education system to suit the needs of the twenty first century, reform proposals were not made public. Only the bare details of some of the reform measures were disclosed by politicians and officials when they actually began to implement the proposals as recommended by the National Education Commission. No adequate information on the reforms was made available to teachers, students or the general public. For example, when officials announced through newspapers that the number of subjects to be offered at the G.C.E. A/L examination from 1998 were reduced from four to three, no official circular of instructions had reached the school authorities. The introduction of a post-A/L aptitude test to select students for university admissions was also announced in the press, with no details at all about what this test would entail. The result was utter confusion in schools. It is exactly this confusion that was exploited by the JVP to mobilize school children for agitational campaigns.

Public policy is a political exercise and it presupposes, and necessitates, clever political engineering when it comes to reforms. However well-intentioned a particular reform initiative may be, it should not be seen as reform imposed from above. Even the best public reform agenda could be resisted by various interest groups who have a stake in the old system. What a wise government should do is to educate the people about all aspects of reforms and the specific necessity before they are actually implemented. The PA government does not seem to have learned this elementary lesson in governance.

This perhaps reflects the old approach to governance with which regimes in Sri Lanka appear to be comfortable. In this approach, policy making is viewed as giving effect to a mandate that regimes are supposed to have derived from the people at the time of their election victory. Once a regime assumes office, further consultation with the people is normally assumed superfluous. Hence the rather imperious attitude that Sri Lankan ruling parties often display whenever new policies are made and implemented. Hence the phenomenon of 'public policy from above'.

In a period when society is intensely fragmented and volatile with a host of competing interest groups vying for social and political spoils, public policy has become a theater of conflict. Therefore, conflict management in public policy is as important as policy reform itself.

A State of Nature in Hambantota: Caste, Family and Political Hegemony

Thomas Hobbes, perhaps the greatest political thinker after Aristotle, describes pre-state human society through the metaphor of the state of nature. In the state of nature where absolute anarchy reigns supreme, life was 'brutish, short and nasty.' This description can be applied with some degree of relevance not only to the North-East provinces in Sri Lanka, but also to the Hambantota district of the 'peaceful' Sinhalese South.

In the second week of August, the UNP vice chairman of the Beliatta Pradeshiya Sabha was gunned down, in broad daylight, reportedly by two persons who came on a motor cycle. Newspapers are replete with stories of stone-walling police investigations, allegedly on the instructions of a leading PA politician in the district.

A few weeks before this incident, a major showdown between PA Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and the JVP MP Nihal Galappathy took place in the same town, interestingly before television cameras. When the incident was shown on national news bulletin of the state-run television station, it was quite disturbing to see the behaviour of a leading politician of the ruling party, a behaviour fashioned in the style of a provincial war lord.

All this, in a way, is beside the point. The point we want to make is that the Hambantota district represents the most concentrated location of caste violence in the 'peaceful' Sinhalese South.

An essay on electoral political violence in Sri Lanka, published in an earlier issue of *Pravada*, analyzed the peculiar presence of caste in political conflict in the Ratnapura district. Our investigations into political violence in the Hambantota district make it very clear that Hambantota is a pre-eminent example of a Hobbsean caste state of nature.

Hambantota shares one peculiarity with Ratnapura; the SLFP leadership comes from the families of the dominant caste, the goyigama while most of the marginalized caste groups embrace the UNP as their political party. But this state of caste affairs has complex combinations and permutations. In the interior of the Hambantota district, the numerically strong Wahumpura caste is generally with the UNP in opposition to the SLFP allied goyigama caste. In the coastal towns of the district, Karawa and Durawa castes are either with the UNP or if they are with the SLFP, they are effectively marginalized by the Goyigama leadership of the SLFP. Both the UNP and the JVP in the Hambantota district recruit their most active members from among non-goyigama castes, primarily because the SLFP political leadership in the entire district is dominated by one kin group, or a family, belonging to the goyigama caste that does not hide its sense of caste superiority and hegemony.

Hambantota is a multi-caste district with mono-caste villages of marginalized caste communities. At the last local government elections in March, even the PA candidates of non-goyigama castes openly say that they were sidelined by their goyigama superiors.

The competition and conflict in the Hambantota district for political representation and supremacy is presently among four caste communities — Goyigama, Karawa, Durawa and Wahumpura. The UNP's political leadership in the district comes from Durawa and Wahumpura castes whereas the JVP's leadership is from the Karawa caste. The SLFP-PA leadership is exclusively monopolized by one goyigama family; when new popular leaders come from non-goyigama castes, they are effectively marginalized or rendered subservient to the goyigama leadership. And indeed, some of the most active UNP leaders in the Hambantota district are ex-SLFPers with non-goyigama social origins.

Elections — whether parliamentary, provincial council or local government — in the Hambantota district have in recent years been particularly violent. Post-election conflicts are rampant in the district. We learn that in Hambantota such innocuous public events as sports festivals end up in caste fights. Who would have thought that Karate has a distinct caste dimension? But, as we have learned recently, in the interior of Hambantota, young men belonging to Goyigama and Wahumpura communities receive training in the martial arts, imparted by gurus of their own castes, in separate schools.

Caste hatred and Karate skills — ideal ingredients to act out a Hobbesian state of nature.

Eating out in Colombo

The protagonist in Romesh Gunasekera's subtle exploration of post-colonial social-political transformations in Sri Lanka is a cook. Some delightful moments of the novel *Reef* are about fish being cooked by Mr. Salgado's retainer-cum-cook. Mr. Salgado is the brown sahib who hails from the landed gentry of suburban Panadura; he represents the weakening umbilical code with the colonial era of the island known until recently as Ceylon.

Mr. Salgado's talented and sensitive cook may not be very happy to realize that Colombo now has many restaurants that offer its customers delightful ethnic meals, not necessarily Sinhalese. The most non-upper class of them are the so-called Chinese restaurants and/or take-aways that have proliferated in most of the suburbs — Kohuwela, Nugegoda, Dehiwela, Maharagama, Ratmalana, Kottawa, Moratuwa, Kiribathgoda, Kandana and even by the side of the Galle Road in Beruwela. Mostly run by Sri Lankans who have worked as kitchen assistants in restaurants in the Middle East, these 'Chinese joints' have proved a point: the greatest cook in the world is not your grandmother; with a lot of soya sauce, **ajino moto**, oil, garlic and ginger, these copy cats of Chinese cookery can make better fish curries and *kankun* preparations. How far their dishes are authentically Chinese is of course another question.

Well, the upper and middle class inhabitants of Colombo do indeed have culinary options other than ordinary Chinese; they have upmarket restaurants to taste, for example, French cuisine with authentic French wine or German restaurants run by Germans and Lebanese restaurants run by Lebanese. How about the Korean restaurants down Duplication road? Well, they are very middle

class, catering to expatriate workers in Colombo and their local cohorts. So are the Indian restaurants in town.

Although the eating habits of Sri Lanka's middle classes are changing, restaurant culture is still very much a middle class affair. Teenagers of middle class families flock to the KFC and the Pizza Hut to eat highly greasy food containing more carbohydrate and animal fat than real nutrients. In the food court of the Majestic City — Colombo's modern shopping complex that nevertheless reminds one of Singapore fifteen years ago — middle class teenagers eat Kentucky fried chicken and lick ice-cream.

In this age of globalization, food habits and tastes are also globalized and homogenized. It is an art of tasting tastelessness. Admiring

culinary tastelessness is an art by itself. The middle class teenagers in Colombo are its immediate victims.

However, instant food of another kind is making headway in suburbia and pushing the restaurant habit further down the social scale. We refer to the stringhopper, hopper and roti takeaways. Since these places also give portions of curry and sambol, suburban families can do without cooking any dinner at all.

It is unfortunate that all these victims of a globalized instant culture will never know or experience the taste of the delightful fish preparations made by Mr. Salgado's cook.

P

The Story of Selestina Dias

Buddhist Female Philanthropy and Education

by

Manel Tampoe

The political economy that led to founding of *Visakha Vidyalaya*.

What were the circumstances that led to capital accumulation by the Moratuwa-Panadura Karawa in the early British colonial period?

What motivated them to make large endowments for the establishment of English media schools?

What was the role of a female philanthropist - Selstina dias in the founding of Visakha Vidyalaya?

Rs: 125/=

Latest SSA Publication. Now Available at

Suriya Bookshop

425/15 Thimbirigasyaya Rd,

Colombo 5.

Ph: 501339 ; Fax: 595563